



# What determines geographical representation on party lists?

Gert-Jan Put — 27th July 2015

*Looking at the composition of candidate lists for the Belgian Lower House elections (1987-2010), **Gert-Jan Put** examines the level of geographical representation on those lists and analyses its determinants.*

Political parties in proportional electoral systems are often obsessively involved with balancing their ticket for a number of candidate characteristics. For

candidates can function as primary nomination criteria in the candidate selection process. By nominating all social subgroups on the party list, parties signal to these groups that their concerns will be addressed. If parties, instead, exclude large subgroups and draft undiversified candidate lists, this might result in negative publicity and electoral defeat. In addition to these electoral incentives, imbalanced candidate lists may also lead to intraparty turmoil caused by underrepresented and dissatisfied party factions.

In a **recent article** for Politics, **Gert-Jan Put** focuses on geographical representation on party lists. While earlier research extensively studied the representation of women and ethnic minorities in parliaments and party lists, the geography dimension is definitely one of the under-researched candidate traits. The large majority of electoral systems work with electoral districts to ensure geographical representation in parliament. But even electoral systems with a single nationwide constituency produce geographically representative parliaments. How do parties achieve this result?

The article analyses the case of the Belgian political parties in the Lower House elections (1987-2010), and takes into account both party-related as electoral system-related explanatory factors. With regard to party-related factors, the results show that parties with decentralised candidate selection methods have more balanced lists. Put differently, if local party branches are involved in the

be represented on the party lists. This means that parties can counterbalance nationalisation and centralisation tendencies as a result of, for example, electoral reform, by decentralising their candidate selection methods.

But electoral system-related factors affect geographical representation as well. Self-evidently, higher numbers of list slots and realistic list positions lead to higher levels of geographical representation. Thus the more space is provided on candidate lists, the more parties will take into account geographical balance on their list. The introduction of gender quota laws, on the contrary, resulted in geographically less balanced lists in Belgium. In sum, while parties are of course affected by the electoral rules at hand while nominating election candidates, they can still ensure sufficient geographical representation levels on party lists through the design of their internal candidate selection methods.

Image: **John Keane**



### **Gert-Jan Put**

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